Pride events inform, inspire

Black gays hail encouragement of fight for rights

By RICHARD L. ELDREDGE
reldredge@ajc.com

The hot pink flier taped to a wall in the lobby of the Sheraton Midtown Atlanta at Colony Square on Saturday afternoon quietly symbolized the weekend's mission statement for the city's 2004 Black Gay Pride.

On the flier was a 1950s photograph of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and his adviser Bayard Rustin at the Montgomery bus boycott. Below it, the words "Stand Up and Be Counted!"

Rustin has gone down in civil rights history as the orchestrator of King's 1963 March on Washington. But privately, the pacifist fought within the black community for his rights as a gay African-American.

For Pride attendee Dante McCommon, that struggle continues.

"For me, this weekend is all about empowerment, education and family," said McCommon, an Atlantan. "In the workplace, especially as an African-American woman, it's difficult to self-identify as homosexual. If you do that and you're working for the wrong guy, you're gone. And we have no protection under

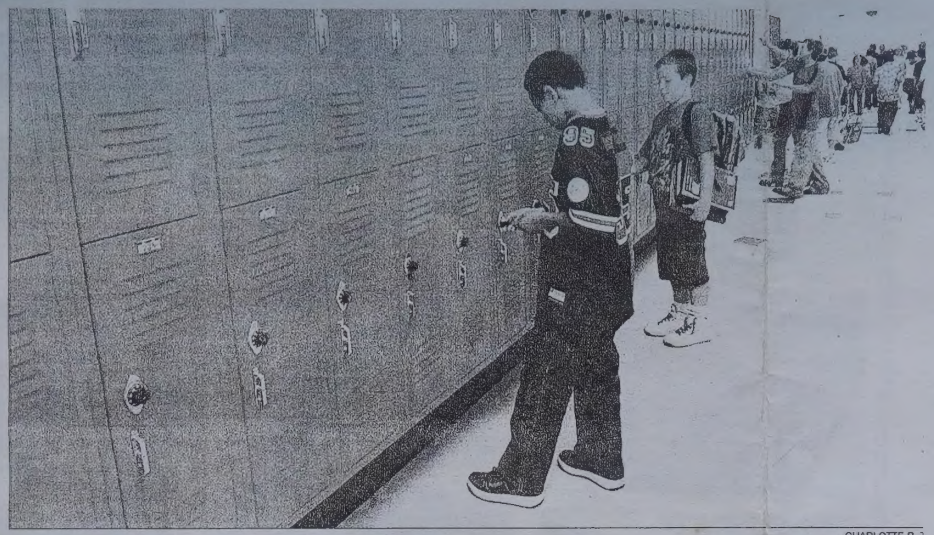
➤ Please see **BLACK GAY, E3**

JESSICA MCGOWAN / Special

Activist Craig Washington discusses gay marriage at a Black Gay Pride seminar at the Sheraton Midtown Atlanta at Colony Square on Saturday.

INSIDE, E4

➤ Thousands enjoy R&B, hip-hop and jazz at Soulfest Atlanta 2004.



CHARLOTTE B. T

Lanier County High does a lot of make-do, such as buying Florida-orange lockers at a discount in Jacksonville and repainting them Georgia-red

EDUCATION GA

Lakeland lacks what Atlantans expect

By MARY MacDONALD
mmacdonald@ajc.com

Lakeland — For three years, the kiln in the art room of teacher Deborah Raines was a depressing symbol of the type of education that rural schools like hers could afford to provide.

After years of longing, Raines fought for and finally obtained $2,200 for a kiln in the Lanier County school budget, only to discover the wiring in its combo middle-high school couldn't get the barrel-sized oven hot enough.

So, for want of $1,500, Raines and her students had to wait three more years for new wiring so the kiln could reach its full potential — a second firing at 1,800 degrees that could deliver a finished glaze.

In isolation, not having ceramics in an art program is not a big deal. But consider that the county's only high school also has no chorus, orchestra or drama program. Middle-schoolers get no arts at all. The school offers just a

➤ Please see **GAP, E15**

Creating pots in a ceramics class at Lanier County High School in Lakeland are (from left) Jenna Tillman, 19, Mackinzie Gardner, 17, and Brooke Mathis, 15.

BIG TAX, LITTLE TAX

Lanier County and other rural school systems often struggle to raise local tax dollars for schools because property values are lower. A comparison of the Lanier County and Decatur city school systems shows the differences:

Lanier County	Decatur City
➤ Enrollment: 1,300	➤ Enrollment: 2,453
➤ School millage: $17.16	➤ School millage: $23.13
➤ Value of 1 mill: $85,938	➤ Value of 1 mill: $611,011
➤ Spending per pupil: $6,289	➤ State and local spending per pupil: $10,958
➤ Student poverty: 69 percent	➤ Student poverty: 38 percent
➤ Graduates entering Georgia public colleges: 22 percent	➤ Graduates entering Georgia public colleges: 35 percent

Notes: The school millage is the amount of tax applied to every $1,000 of property value to generate local funding for schools. Comparisons are for the 2001-02 school year. Spending per pupil represents state and local dollars.

Source: Georgia Department of Education

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By JAMES SALZE
jsalzer@ajc.com

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➤ Please see **LA**

Black gay: Pride festivities empower, entertain attendees

➤ Continued from E1

the law."

The city's annual Black Gay Pride weekend continues to distinguish itself from the city's Gay Pride celebration in June by focusing on activism, political education, voter registration and health issues.

Last year, the five-day event drew more than 8,000 people. This year, Pride co-chairman Michael Slaughter estimates there are 30,000 from across the country and around the world, including the United Kingdom, South Africa and Canada.

"In the African-American community, homosexuality is still a taboo subject," said Slaughter on Saturday outside the hotel's bustling seminar halls. "It is still more accepted in the African-American community to be a murderer or a drug dealer than to be gay. Coming together like this for education and fellowship can help change that."

Saturday's hot workshops included sessions on "Demystifying the 'Down Low': The Reality of Black Masculinity, Sexual Identity, and HIV Among Black Men Who Have Sex with Men" and "Keeping the Faith — Homophobia and the Black Church."

Attendee Shameka Lloyd of Washington was energized by the latter. "It is extremely uncommon to find a black church that is tolerant of homosexuals," Lloyd said. "It is one of our community's biggest problems. Our churches are supposed to embrace us all with love. For gay people, that's simply not happening. Instead, we're being condemned."

Between bouts of activism, Pride attendees did take time out for entertainment. Atlanta television director Maurice Townes was holding multiple screenings of his black gay series "The Closet" to standing-room-only crowds. DVDs of the series available for sale were being snatched up off a nearby table.

"We do realize that people want to have a good time socially, as well," Slaughter conceded, laughing.

Photos by JESSICA MCGOWAN / Special

SCENES FROM 2004 BLACK GAY PRIDE

Saturday's events mixed education and fun. **Nick McCoy** (from top right, clockwise) of Georgians Against Discrimination reads names on a memory quilt. **Linda Felix** relaxes at the health fair during a reflexology treatment. **Emma Johnson** offers question cards in a game on achievements in the gay community.

Gwinnett

or black gays

BITA HONARVAR / Staff

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Added the Rev. Kathi Martin, pastor of God, Self and Neighborhood Ministries in Atlanta, who has presided over about 15 same-sex marriages, "I do see a shift [in attitudes at black churches], but it's very slow."

Upbeat reactions

Still, for many black gays and lesbians, Atlanta remains a revelation.

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"This is a city that effected so much change around the country," he said. "You feel it's a city that still wants to effect change."

Added Mashaun Simon, 24, an Atlanta native attending Georgia Perimeter College, "For me, it's all about being comfortable. Here in Atlanta, there are a number of places I can go if I want to be around what I call 'my people' — other African-American homosexuals."

Kevin Bynes, like many black gays

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Atlanta a hub for black gays

But many find black mainstream unfriendly

By DREW JUBERA, DAVID WAHLBERG and KRISTINA TORRES

BITA HONARVAR / Staff

"It's so nice to see yourself in other people," says Trevor Pettiford, a reporter for Fox 5 who came to Atlanta from Orlando in 1998.

In his mid-20s, Byron Mason was in San Francisco, living the life of many gay men's dreams — an apartment near the Castro district, a deejay gig at a funky nightclub, artsy friends and plenty of potential boyfriends within easy eyeshot.

But one thing was often missing: other black gay men.

Nearly two years ago, Mason moved to the land of black gay men's dreams — Atlanta, where he can go to black gay bars, black gay house parties, even black gay book clubs.

"Atlanta is definitely a mecca for black gay men," said Mason, 31, an HIV prevention researcher at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "You see so many types of African-Americans here, so many professionals, including so many who are gay."

Whether Atlanta is a mecca, a magnet or merely a newfound hometown, it is viewed around the country as a fast-growing if imperfect center for black gays and lesbians — in much the same way as it is considered all those things for straight African-Americans.

Many black gays talk about visiting Atlanta and never leaving, staying after attending one of the historically black colleges, of finding themselves surrounded by so many others like themselves that they feel a comfort level not experienced anywhere else.

According to the 2000 census, Atlanta ranked third among cities with a population of more than 100,000 in the number of same-sex households, behind San Francisco and Seattle. It ranked second in the number of African-American same-sex households, behind only the Washington-Baltimore metropolitan area.

"The perception is, in Atlanta, you can be who you are in a big city and you can still live in the South," said Donna Payne, who visits Atlanta often. She is a field organizer for a Washington-based organization that lobbies for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender rights.

"You can go out and be freer than you can in other communities," added the Memphis native, who noted that when one travels 20 miles outside other Southern cities, "you hit the Bible Belt mentality. But it's Atlanta. The feel and the vibe is it's a little bit freer."

Yet few black gays and lesbians view Atlanta as paradise. Almost no mainstream, predominantly black churches welcome them, and some are openly hostile. Some black gays find themselves disguising or denying their sexual orientation because of a lack of acceptance in the general black community. Some black men say they are on "the down low" — often in relationships with women but having sex with men.

In a national Gallup Poll, only 40 percent of black respondents — 11 percentage points fewer than whites — felt homosexuality should be considered an acceptable lifestyle.

When asked whether marriages between homosexuals should be recognized as legally valid, less than a third of black respondents thought they should — 5 percentage points fewer than among whites.

A recent Gallup Poll also found that a slightly higher percentage of Southerners favored a constitutional amendment limiting marriage to a man and a woman than did respondents in any other region.

'Triple jeopardy'

Mississippi native Mary Anne Adams, 49, who moved to Atlanta in 1988, said it was important for the black gay community to distinguish itself from its white counterpart. Adams, for instance, said she faced "triple jeopardy: I'm black, a woman and lesbian. We have our own set of issues. This is not a monolithic community."

These swirling, often opposing forces in Atlanta — a burgeoning black gay community amid a black straight community that is largely hard-shell conservative on gay issues — are being felt by black representatives since the constitutional amendment banning gay marriage moved to the Georgia House after approval in the state Senate.

Blacks in the General Assembly will play a crucial role in deciding whether the proposed constitutional ban on gay marriage passes. But the subject is complex for them and encompasses issues ranging from religious and sexual beliefs to race and civil rights. It creates "cross pressures," said Frank Newport, editor in chief of the Gallup Poll, for black Democratic legislators, whose party is liberal on gay issues but much of whose constituency is not.

Sen. Ed Harbison (D-Columbus), chairman of the Georgia Legislative Black Caucus, said the group of African-American lawmakers had not taken an official position on Senate Resolution 595 or on the issue of same-sex marriage.

The caucus is not voting as a bloc, Harbison said, even though all 10 black senators voted no Monday. The House has 39 black members.

"There is a feeling and mind-set that believes that marriage is defined as man and woman," Harbison said. "But the black community has always been uncomfortable oppressing other people."

Despite his vote against the proposed amendment to ban gay marriage, Harbison said he personally opposed such marriages.

Mainstream black churches — a vital part of the African-American community at large — have distanced themselves from Atlanta's black gays and lesbians. Black gays talk of funeral and memorial services where the deceased have been "heterosexualized" and where AIDS-related deaths have been glossed over as "cancer." They talk of pastors bashing gays from the pulpit.

"Why should we go in and get beat up, then try to fish out of that experience what is affirming?" said Craig Washington, 44, who moved to Atlanta from New York with a partner almost 12 years ago.

The Rev. Timothy McDonald is pastor of First Iconium Baptist Church in East Atlanta, where he said at least two men and one woman were gay but not out to the 2,000-member congregation.

"The black church is still very conservative when it comes to the issue of homosexuality," he said. "The visibility is almost nil in the black church. At times there is still hostility. That makes it difficult for gays who happen to be black to relate to the church."

But at a recent Buckhead conference of 400 interdenominational black pastors from around the country, McDonald heard several talk openly about homosexuality.

"That was the first time I've seen that kind of open discussion among black pastors," he said. "I said, 'OK, we're getting there.' "

Added the Rev. Kathi Martin, pastor of God, Self and Neighborhood Ministries in Atlanta, who has presided over about 15 same-sex marriages, "I do see a shift [in attitudes at black churches], but it's very slow."

Upbeat reactions

Still, for many black gays and lesbians, Atlanta remains a revelation.

Washington had what he called a "Midnight Train to Georgia" moment — "You now, 'I'd rather live in his world than live without him in mine'," he said — when he and his former partner moved here from New York in 1992. The first place they walked into together was a Waffle House, where "people said, 'Hey, how you doing?' We were like, 'Wow, people are really friendly here.' "

Atlanta, he said, is "the only city I would consider living in in the Southeast."

Trevor Pettiford had a similar experience before moving here from Orlando in 1998 to be a reporter with Fox 5 Atlanta. While attending Atlanta Pride, the annual gay celebration at Piedmont Park, he was amazed to see politicians and firefighters marching along with throngs of gay people, many of whom were black.

"It's so nice to see yourself in other people," said Pettiford, 40. "You get a sense that you can make it here because you see other African-Americans who have made it, straight or gay."

As Pettiford sees it, Atlanta's pull as a black gay mecca is largely a numbers game. With so many African-Americans and so many gays here, the city is an oasis for people who are both.

But the spring runs deeper, he said. Atlanta's reputation as the cradle of the civil rights movement provides a steady inspiration. Pettiford, who lives in Grant Park with his partner, frequently drives by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s tomb and birth home.

"This is a city that effected so much change around the country," he said. "You feel it's a city that still wants to effect change."

Added Mashaun Simon, 24, an Atlanta native attending Georgia Perimeter College, "For me, it's all about being comfortable. Here in Atlanta, there are a number of places I can go if I want to be around what I call 'my people' — other African-American homosexuals."

Kevin Bynes, like many black gays here, acknowledges the good and bad of Atlanta. But ultimately he sees the city as a better place for people like himself than almost anywhere else.

"I don't like to use the term 'mecca' because mecca is like a representation of this holy and perfect place," said Bynes, 28, who moved here from his hometown of Oakland, Calif., to attend Clark Atlanta University and who works for AID Atlanta. "There's still a lot of bigotry in Atlanta, even as much as we want to pride ourselves on being 'The City Too Busy to Hate.' "

But, he added, "Coming here for the first time as a black person in general and a gay black person, you see Atlanta being like no other city. There's a certain level of pride of blackness here, black people doing well professionally and financially, black people running things.

"Most of us end up coming here not because it's a black gay mecca, but because it's a black mecca in general."

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Atlanta a hub f

But many find black mainstream unfriendly

By DREW JUBERA, DAVID WAHLBERG and KRISTINA TORRES

In his mid-20s, Byron Mason was in San Francisco, living the life of many gay men's dreams — an apartment near the Castro district, a deejay gig at a funky nightclub, artsy friends and plenty of potential boyfriends within easy eyeshot.

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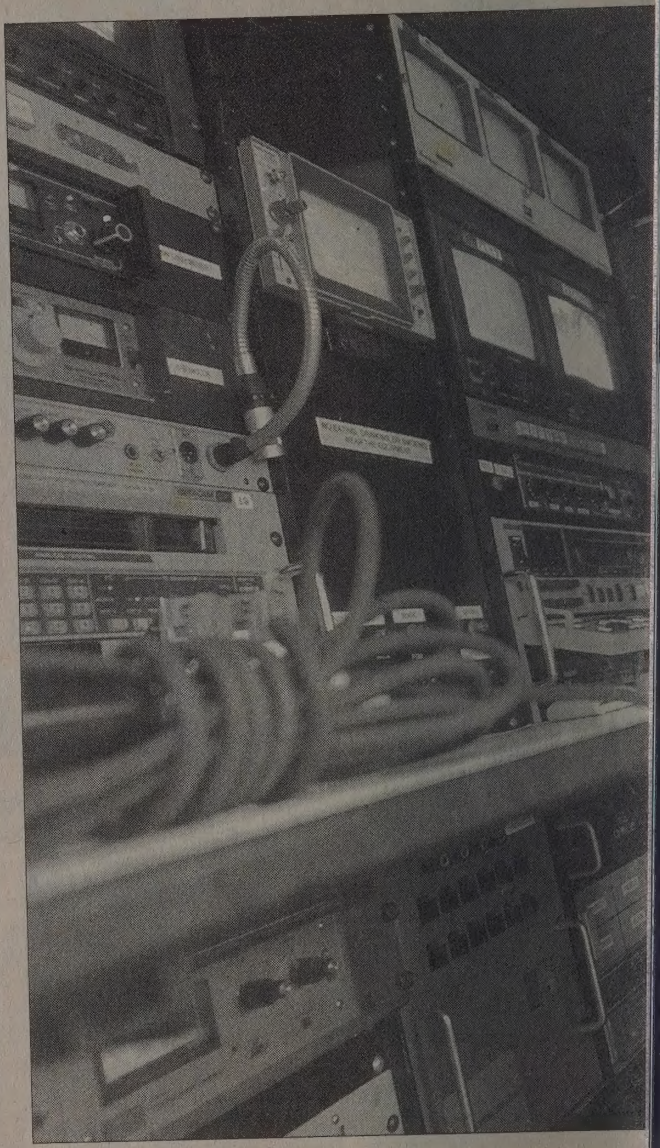

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RTHDAY

Gays hold holiday in high esteem

By CHARLES YOO
cyoo@ajc.com

Among the clergymen signed up to say a prayer at the Martin Luther King Jr. Day march in Atlanta is Rabbi Joshua Lesser, a 32-year-old gay man who leads a Reconstructionist synagogue.

Another guest is Atlanta City Council President Cathy Woolard, the parade's grand marshal who happens to be lesbian. And a few AIDS organizations and gay rights groups will be there, too, carrying their banners.

At the annual event in the capital of the civil rights movement, gays have found a place at the table, meshing peacefully with other equality activists.

Perhaps, what's more profound is that King has become a modern-day pedagogue for gays in their own fight for acceptance. And the civil rights activist community has quietly embraced gay participants.

Some say the bond between the two groups stretches back to the days when King relied on Bayard Rustin. Rustin, a gay aide to King, is credited for his behind-the-scenes work in organizing the 1963 march on Washington.

"Much of the time [King] was able to embrace Rustin, but occasionally he distanced himself," said John D'Emilio, professor of gender studies and history at the University of Illinois at Chicago, who is writing a biography on Rustin.

Rustin, who died in 1987, had helped create SCLC and the Congress of Racial Equality, according to the Contemporary Black Biography. But he was made to forfeit a lead role in helping King after threats from his critics within the black community who tried to out him.

For many gays in Atlanta, the holiday honoring King has become a formal event to carefully plan and carry out. For example, a community brunch, funded by Human Rights Campaign, a national gay political lobbying group, will be held at the Atlanta Gay and Lesbian Center on Ralph McGill Boulevard.

"We took the page from the history book and emulated it, said Jimmie Scott, who is black and gay.

"What I see in our participation of the celebration is that we are all connected," said the Atlanta resident and member of Georgia Equality, a gay political lobbying group. "We're part of the same family."

Yet the relationship between gays and civil rights activists is complicated by the role of Christian churches, which have been the backbone of the civil rights movement as well as the gay community's most vocal critic, historians and community leaders say.

Pejorative views still flood some congregations. Consider the controversial speech decrying homosexuals from the Rev. Reggie White, a former Green Bay Packers football player, at the Southern Baptist Convention meeting in Atlanta two years ago.

"The presence of gays in this march speaks of the level of understanding and coexistence that goes beyond a specific interpretation of Christianity," said Craig Washington, director of the center.

For veteran civil rights activists such as Joseph Lowery, their mission never excluded anyone, yet he says certain issues such as marriage for gay couples invite discussion.

"Every human being is sacred in the sight of God, but there may be room for debate for some technical and tertiary issues," said Lowery, former president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

King's widow, Coretta Scott King, has always been supportive of gay issues and has been a consistent champion of gay rights.

Forty years later, acceptance prompts gay Jews like Lesser to march.

"I want to be able to help my African-American gay and lesbian [friends] in my community to be welcomed in their own community, too," he said.

Upholding his honor

Officer who grew up in Atlanta defends act that ended his career

By YOLANDA RODRÍGUEZ
yrodriguez@ajc.com

Fort Hood, Texas — Since his days in Junior ROTC at an Atlanta high school two decades ago, Allen B. West says, all he ever wanted to do was serve in the Army.

But on a warm, clear night last August, all he wanted was information from an Iraqi police officer.

West had risen to the rank of lieutenant colonel and commanded the 4th Infantry Division's 2nd Battalion, 20th Field Artillery. The unit had come under attack repeatedly in its efforts to police the shaky peace in Iraq following the fall of Saddam Hussein. And West believed the man he was questioning, Yahya Jhodri Hamoodi, knew about impending attacks targeting his troops.

The events of that night ended his career.

Last year, amid allegations Hamoodi was brutally beaten during the Aug. 20 interrogation in Taji, Iraq, West faced a possible court-martial. Eventually the officer, who was decorated for valor during the first Persian Gulf War, faced an administrative hearing where he was found guilty of aggravated assault and communicating a threat. He was fined $5,000 and allowed to retire.

The military's treatment of West, who is completing the final weeks of his career at Fort Hood, has sparked debate about the acceptable use of coercion during wartime. An online petition garnered more than 136,000 signatures supporting West.

'We leaned hard on' suspect

West continues to defend his actions as in the best interest of his troops. But he said in a recent interview that he had never felt good about what happened that night.

"We leaned hard on [Hamoodi]," said West, who admits he shot his pistol in the air. But he added that the interrogation was "nothing where his arm was broken" or a finger "whacked off . . . or anything like that."

An informant told one of West's officers that Hamoodi had met with people who knew about planned attacks. Press reports said West's soldiers beat Hamoodi at their officer's command. West acknowledged Hamoodi was punched and shoved, but not on his orders, he said.

He said he put one hand on Hamoodi's head, which had been shoved into a sandbox, and fired his .9 mm pistol a second time, away from Hamoodi. West also threatened Hamoodi with death if he didn't talk.

"I [was] thinking that I am the commander, and I have a responsibility," West said, adding he had no intention of hurting Hamoodi.

The tactics worked. The Iraqi described plans to place a sniper near a route traveled by West's soldiers. The troops took extra precautions, and Hamoodi was released about 40 days later.

West reported his actions to his superior the night of the incident and also took Hamoodi to a physician's assistant for treatment after the interrogation. Weeks later, after anonymous complaints about West's conduct and the broader command climate in the 4th Infantry Division, the division's commander, Major Gen. Raymond Odierno, relieved West of his command and began an investigation.

West initially was offered a chance to resign without retirement benefits or face a court-martial and eight years in prison if convicted.

In November, during an Article 32 hearing — akin to a civilian grand jury proceeding — he said he would "go through hell with a gas can" to protect his troops.

"In everybody's life there are decisive points," said West, 43.

This was one of them.

LAURA SKELDING / Austin American-Statesman

Lt. Col. Allen B. West of the Army's 4th Infantry Division contends he did what he had to for his troops. He fired a gun near an Iraqi detainee while interrogating him on possible pending attacks. He was fined and is retiring.

A legacy of service

Allen Bernard West always wanted to be in the military, following the example of his father, Herman West Sr., an Army corporal wounded in Italy in 1943, and his brother, Herman Jr., a Marine wounded in Vietnam.

He grew up on Atlanta's Kennesaw Avenue, within walking distance of the old Sears store on Ponce de Leon, where he worked as a teenager. He also sold Baskin-Robbins ice cream at Ansley Mall and Cokes at Fulton County Stadium.

"I just had a good home, good upbringing, two very involved parents. They were tough. But there was a reason for it," West said.

He attended Fort Street United Methodist Church on Boulevard, where he was an acolyte and sang in the choir with his younger brother, Arlan. Fort Street is still his home church, he said.

His parents sent him to Our Lady of Lourdes Elementary School and later Marist High School in Chamblee. They thought the Catholic parochial schools would challenge him more, he said.

But at age 15, he had his eyes set on neighborhood Grady High School and its JROTC program. To convince his parents of his determination, he ran away from home.

Once his parents relented and allowed him to leave parochial school, West found the challenges he had been looking for at Grady — a school with a diverse population, JROTC, football and track teams. He was co-president of the student government.

"I know the path that my life took would not have been possible if not for being at Grady," he said.

Mourning a loss

After he was relieved of his command and said goodbye to his troops, West says he faced many "tear-filled nights" deciding what he should do.

He considered resigning out of fear of the effect on his daughters, Aubrey, 10, and Austen, 7, if he lost. "That was the only thing I was afraid of — that my daughters would have to visit their dad in jail," he said.

The girls and their mother, Angela, have moved to Plantation, Fla., to wait until his tenure with the Army ends.

By the end of October, West was ready to walk away. When he turned on his computer to e-mail his decision to his lawyers and his wife, he found 20 e-mails from well-wishers telling him to "hang in there."

"I felt like it was God's way of telling me you are going to be OK," said West, who is deeply religious.

The next day, 100 e-mails arrived, and eventually more than 2,000. His wife has received more than 11,000 letters and 4,000 e-mails of support.

West still believes he did what was best for the men whose safety was his responsibility. But with the career he always wanted nearing its end, he has found solace in his faith.

He has read the Book of Job and the stories about David and Samson, warriors who were tested, fell and were restored. "That's the nature of adversity," he said. "I believe you can overcome stuff. No matter how bad it may seem."

He has paid the fine. His retirement benefits are intact, and he is scheduled to walk out of Fort Hood on April 19. Now West wants to teach high school students and coach football and track. He admits to sadness about ending his military career but says he feels no anger. He is ready to move on.

"I am not a victim," he said.

SHARING HIS TESTIMONY

➤ Lt. Col. Allen B. West will speak at the Butler Street CME Church, 23 Jesse Hill Jr. Drive, on Sunday during the 11 a.m. service. For more information: www.butlerstreetcmechurch.org

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'Passion': Atlanta churches ignite ticket sales

➤ Continued from A1

Atlanta, said Rick King of AMC Theaters. Members of one local church bought $63,000 worth of tickets and plan to give them away to anyone who shows up at the theater.

Nationally, theaters have reported $8 million in advance ticket sales — amazing for a movie that had trouble finding a distributor, features a story everyone knows, and is filmed in languages that very few understand.

The $30 million film, co-written, directed and financed by Gibson, has appeared on covers of magazines from Newsweek to Christianity Today. It has turned preachers into public relations machines and drawn attention from religious entities ranging from the Vatican to the Anti-Defamation League.

For those who have seen the movie, the draw is simple.

"It was one of the most compelling movies that I've ever seen in my life," said Wayne Killingbeck, a member of New Birth Missionary Baptist Church in Lithonia, who saw the movie and plans to attend another screening.

"It really just made you want to weep."

A foreign-language film from an independent company, "Passion" is acting like a Hollywood blockbuster.

The film, in Aramaic and Latin with English subtitles, has outstripped advance sales of all movies in his memory, King said — including "Lord of the Rings" and "Harry Potter."

The movie will be seen in 2,800 theaters on opening day, up from the 2,000 originally planned. That puts the medium-budget movie in the ranks of "Master and Commander," which was seen at 3,101 theaters in its November debut.

Multiple showings at some theaters mean the movie will be seen on at least 4,000 screens — leading some distributors to guess that the movie will earn back Gibson's investment in its first weekend.

Associated Press

Superstar-turned-director Mel Gibson directs Jim Caviezel, who plays Jesus, on the set of Gibson's "The Passion of The Christ." The film's tremendous following is prompting hot sales of a variety of related merchandise (below).

Jewelry and other licensed "Passion" merchandise has been selling briskly at Christian stores and online and a "Passion" photo book, out for just a week, is already in extra printings. Among the merchandise that is available (www.thepassionofthechrist.com) is a leather necklace with a pendant shaped like a 2.6-inch nail. "They're flying off the shelves," said a spokesman for jewelry designer Bob Siemon.

The tremendous demand is a testament to the movie's grass-roots following. With minimal television advertising, the R-rated retelling of the Crucifixion story has gained momentum from a cross-section of Christian denominations — including Catholics, conservative Baptists, moderate Presbyterians and evangelical African-American churches.

Among them:

➤ The 7,000-member Body of Christ Church International in College Park, which plans to buy out an Atlanta theater for a group viewing of the film.

➤ First Baptist Church Douglasville, which bought out six opening night showings at an Arbor Place theater, reserving 2,500 seats.

➤ New Birth Missionary Baptist Church, which bought all the tickets to five preview screenings at a Mall at Stonecrest theater.

➤ First Baptist Church Woodstock, whose members bought all tickets to the first five days of screenings at the Cherokee 16 on Town Lake Parkway. Admission will be free to whoever walks up, said member Ryan Floyd, who coordinated a fund-raising campaign that produced $63,000 in two weeks — enough to buy out 53 showings. "We're leaving the tickets at the theater," Floyd said.

Gibson has carefully fostered church support. His production company, Icon, screened early versions of the movie last summer before sympathetic audiences. His marketing partner sent thousands of promotional kits to churches. They included a DVD with a four-minute trailer and ways to use the movie to evangelize.

Christian groups took up the cause, promoting advance sales, working to turn the movie into a hit with the belief that success would encourage more Christian films and bring more people to Christ. Many churches have reserved screens and are insisting that their members each bring an unchurched friend to the movie.

Next Sunday, New Hope Baptist Church in Fayetteville will give away $5-off coupons for "Passion" screenings. Their instructions: "Invite a friend," said executive pastor Tim Woodruff.

First Baptist Church Woodstock will do the same. "I . . . told the members, 'Don't you dare come by yourself,' " Floyd said.

The Connector Fellowship Christian Church is sending out 1,000 fliers to its Austell neighbors inviting them to a church service Sunday, Feb. 29, followed by lunch and a ticket to the film. Visitors won't have to walk far: The new church meets in Austell's Regal 22 multiplex.

"The Passion" is rated R for extreme violence. Much of its grueling two hours is devoted to the scourging and crucifixion of Christ.

Wes Cantrell, a Woodstock youth minister, said that the graphic violence was appropriate to the subject matter. "I don't think the average Christian has any understanding at all of the suffering that Christ went through on our behalf," he said.

Cantrell plans to take a youth group to the movie on opening night, with a group of adult leaders on hand to offer counseling. Young and old will be affected strongly, he said: "They're going to be messed over."

Photos by JOHN AMIS / Special

anticipate spring, buy color

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A $2 MILLION MANSION

Photos by W.A. BRIDGES JR. / Staff

Chancellor **Thomas Meredith** says he didn't demand the house be bought, calling it "a critical piece of the image and what the University System represents." Right: A spiral staircase.

WHERE THE MONEY WENT

A breakdown of public money spent since 2001 on the official residence of Thomas Meredith, chancellor of the University System of Georgia:

Purchase price: $1,895,000

Purchase option: $150,000

*** Back rent:** $60,000

Maintenance and upkeep: $125,920

Total: $2,230,920

* The Board of Regents made this payment to its nonprofit foundation three days after purchasing the house from the foundation.

Source: University System of Georgia

House: Regents bailed out foundation

➤ Continued from A1

Money is short, but they have no plans to sell the residence.

"Absolutely not!" the regents' chairman, former Gov. Joe Frank Harris, said in a written statement. "We purchased this home to ensure our national competitiveness, which must be maintained if we are to operate a top-flight system of public higher education."

The regents "made a wise decision in purchasing this home when they did," Meredith said. "In terms of the costs spent on the house since they've had it, I don't believe there have been any unnecessary expenditures."

Meredith's annual compensation package is worth $480,450, plus the use of a car and the house.

Although Meredith took the job expecting a housing allowance instead of a residence, officials say Georgia cannot compete for the best job candidates without a chancellery. A survey by the Chronicle of Higher Education, published in 2002, found that 22 of the nation's 30 centralized public university systems provided official residences for their top officials.

Many of those homes have existed for decades, though. For instance, the president of the 16-campus University of North Carolina lives in a house completed in 1907 with $15,000 in donated money.

The central contradiction concerning Georgia's chancellery — profuse spending amid $316 million in budget cuts — mirrors a recent controversy involving the regents and Meredith's predecessor, Stephen Portch. Legislative leaders learned in December that when Portch retired in 2001, the regents agreed to pay him $450,000 in consulting fees. Lawmakers said the deal demonstrated a need for tighter spending control over the regents.

The chancellery became a publicly owned residence through a series of transactions between the regents and their own nonprofit fundraising affiliate. In essence, the University System of Georgia bailed out the University System of Georgia Foundation.

When the foundation couldn't raise enough money to pay the mortgage and other expenses related to the house, the regents used public money to acquire an option to buy the property, then to purchase it outright, and finally, to pay retroactive rent after the sale. Along the way, the state treasury became one of the foundation's largest benefactors.

Regents, however, say questions about the chancellery distract attention from the real issue facing state universities: the budget cuts.

"It is at times like these," said Hilton Howell, the regents' chairman when the house was acquired, "that we need to be very careful about what we criticize and what we say about people who are doing this good work for us."

First chancellery sold

The mansion in Buckhead isn't Georgia's first chancellery. The regents owned a house on Habersham Road for 30 years, but after it fell into disrepair, the state sold the property in 1995 for $557,750.

Thomas and Susan Meredith own most of the furnishings in the chancellery. Furnishings from an earlier chancellor's residence had been given away.

Portch lived in his own home in Newnan, and the regents paid him an annual housing allowance that reached $65,000 in his last year in office.

Meredith agreed to the same amount when he accepted the job in October 2001. Although the allowance would cover a $1 million mortgage, he said he preferred not to buy a house in Atlanta.

The regents knew, Meredith said during an interview, that in his previous job as the University of Alabama's chancellor, he had been provided with two houses — one to live in and another next door for entertaining.

Georgia's buying a chancellery "was not a demand from me," Meredith said. "But it was certainly one of the numerous factors you look at when you're considering your next move."

The regents enlisted their foundation to find Meredith a house. The latter group was created in 1995 to help the regents — 18 gubernatorial appointees who set policy for the University System — raise money for such purposes as supplementing the chancellor's salary and awarding scholarships.

The week after Christmas 2001, days before Meredith was to take office, the foundation took out a $1.9 million mortgage on a 3-year-old Tudor-style house in a small gated community near the Governor's Mansion. The house was appraised at $2.5 million.

The regents had given away most of the furnishings from the old chancellery, and the new house was empty. With the 2002 legislative session beginning shortly, Meredith said, he needed help pulling the house together.

It would come from a decorator named Bill Stewart.

Wife oversaw designer

Meredith said his wife has "the best taste of anyone I know."

When she saw the new house, he said, she told him: "We can't do the chancellor's house and not do it well. I don't know people in Atlanta, where you get things. I don't know what's acceptable here."

"She was very conscious of doing that appropriately," Meredith said.

Susan Meredith learned that Stewart had decorated a ballroom at the Governor's Mansion, the chancellor said, which meant he "understood the intricacies of working with the state . . . that you couldn't just buy anything no matter what."

The chancellery presented a challenge, Stewart said.

"The house they purchased was a vanilla house," he said. "It didn't have a lot of character."

Using vintage rugs and eclectic items from flea markets, antiques shops and discount stores, the decorator went to work "combining things that cost a lot of money with things that cost no money."

Stewart decided where the Merediths' furniture would look best in the new house. He picked out new bedspreads. He helped unpack boxes and put up artwork.

Stewart charged what was then his standard rate: $100 an hour. His bill for February 2002 was typical:

➤ Feb. 5: "Met Susan [Meredith] at office. Went . . . to look for fabrics, wallcoverings, etc. and discussed project. 5.0 Hrs."

➤ Feb. 13: "Met at office to review paint colors with fabrics (1.5 Hrs.). Went to house with paints to select colors, etc. (2.5 Hrs.)."

➤ Feb. 14: "Looked for rugs. 2.0 Hrs."

With 12 such entries, Stewart's bill to the regents' foundation that month came to $3,400. When the job was done, records show, decorating the chancellery cost the foundation $49,109, including $14,399 in fees and commissions to Stewart.

His work, Stewart said, is time-consuming and requires expertise — even when it involves arranging objects on kitchen shelves.

"Think about it," Stewart said in an interview. "Everyone's talent is different. That is paying for my talent."

Susan Meredith had chosen baskets and pottery for the kitchen, and Stewart added books and family photographs to the mix.

"We had to edit them," Stewart said. "We had to place them. Basically I went in there and organized and told her what would look good and what wouldn't. They have to entertain. They have to have people over. They have to have a nice background to do this."

He paused, searching for an apt analogy.

Then he said: "Can you cut your lawn as well as a professional?"

Fund-raising falters

Efforts to raise money for the chancellery faltered. Howell, then the regents' chairman, contributed $50,000 for furnishings. But because of the struggling economy, officials say, the foundation needed help.

Beginning in January 2002, the regents made several payments that appear to have kept the foundation afloat. The first was a $150,000 option to purchase the chancellery, coming just two weeks after the foundation bought the house. That payment amounted to more than half of all the money the foundation raised that year.

Harris, who chairs the regents, declined several requests for an interview. In a statement responding to written questions, he said the regents took the option to make sure the foundation would not sell the house to another party. Most of the foundation's board members, however, were former or current regents.

"The house is located in a highly desirable location, and would sell easily if placed on the open market," Harris wrote. "The foundation could have chosen to 'cash out' the home for the investment value it represented, without this option clause."

Soon, officials looked for other ways to pay off the mortgage. The regents asked the foundations at four universities for donations of $100,000 a year, records show. Instead, each provided a one-time loan of about $60,000.

That wasn't enough.

"We have chancellery commitments; we have ongoing expenses," regent Wanda Yancey Rodwell told her colleagues in October 2002, according to minutes of the meeting. "The system needs to own this house."

Regent Joel Wooten concurred. "Buy now," he said. "There will be no good time."

Neither regent agreed to be interviewed.

By May 2003 the regents had a plan: The state would buy the chancellery from the regents' foundation for $1.9 million, the original sales price. For reasons Harris declined to address, none of the $150,000 option counted toward the purchase.

The money came mostly from the sale of the former chancellor's residence and of a president's house that had belonged to Georgia State University.

Harris and other officials said money had been held in a restricted reserve fund and could not have been used to ease campus budget pains. However, the University System had been using proceeds from the former chancellor's home to run a short-term loan program for campus construction projects.

The sale closed last June 27. Three days later, records show, the regents paid the foundation $60,000 in "supplemental" rent. That retroactive rent on a house the regents already owned brought taxpayers' total cost for the chancellery at that point to $2,105,000.

'Critical' to image

On a recent Friday morning, Meredith sat in a beige wing chair in the chancellery's living room, his feet resting on a $12,000 Oriental rug. It would be fair to say, he acknowledged, that if he were spending his own money he might have taken a pass on the expensive carpets, the decorator, maybe the house itself.

"You're talking to a guy who grew up in a home where neither parent went to college," said Meredith, 62, a native of Owensboro, Ky. "We were lower middle-class in terms of income. You're talking to someone who's so tight — you talk to the staff at the office and they'll tell you, it drives them crazy. . . .

"So do I think that's extravagant?" he said of the chancellery expenses. "Well, I mean, to spend anything for any of those things is hard on me."

But his tastes didn't drive decisions on the chancellery, Meredith said.

"The responsibility here is not one of just Tom and Susan Meredith getting by and hanging out," he said. "This is a building that represents the University System of Georgia. It's a critical piece of the image and what the University System represents."

Natural light floods most of the main floor of the house, which flows easily along marble and hardwood floors from a high-ceilinged foyer to a formal living room to a combined den and kitchen that overlooks a natural back yard. The study, which serves as Meredith's home office, has dark-paneled walls and a large computer hutch — one of the few furnishings the state purchased. The Merediths own the rest.

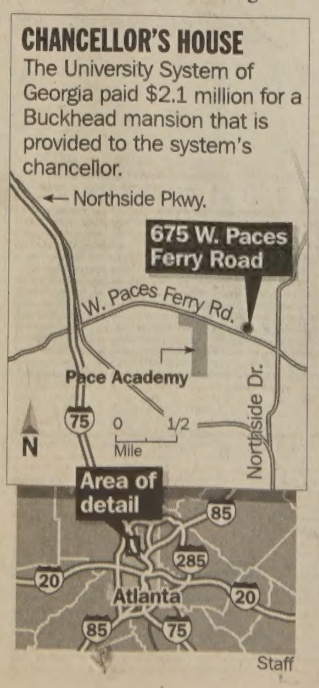
To reduce costs to the state, Meredith said he and his wife paid for some improvements, such as ceiling fans and draperies in their bedroom. Susan Meredith painted some walls herself.

Regardless, how the chancellery might be perceived on Georgia's struggling campuses is "a legitimate question," Meredith said.

But he added: "You have to focus on the long-term issues and not get too caught up in the immediate crisis. . . . It's a beautiful home in a convenient, safe and secure location. I believe it's an asset for the system."

CHANCELLOR'S HOUSE

The University System of Georgia paid $2.1 million for a Buckhead mansion that is provided to the system's chancellor.



Staff

RTHDAY

Gays hold holiday in high esteem

By CHARLES YOO
cyoo@ajc.com

Among the clergymen signed up to say a prayer at the Martin Luther King Jr. Day march in Atlanta is Rabbi Joshua Lesser, a 32-year-old gay man who leads a Reconstructionist synagogue.

Another guest is Atlanta City Council President Cathy Woolard, the parade's grand marshal who happens to be lesbian. And a few AIDS organizations and gay rights groups will be there, too, carrying their banners.

At the annual event in the capital of the civil rights movement, gays have found a place at the table, meshing peacefully with other equality activists.

Perhaps, what's more profound is that King has become a modern-day pedagogue for gays in their own fight for acceptance. And the civil rights activist community has quietly embraced gay participants.

Some say the bond between the two groups stretches back to the days when King relied on Bayard Rustin. Rustin, a gay aide to King, is credited for his behind-the-scenes work in organizing the 1963 march on Washington.

"Much of the time [King] was able to embrace Rustin, but occasionally he distanced himself," said John D'Emilio, professor of gender studies and history at the University of Illinois at Chicago, who is writing a biography on Rustin.

Rustin, who died in 1987, had helped create SCLC and the Congress of Racial Equality, according to the Contemporary Black Biography. But he was made to forfeit a lead role in helping King after threats from his critics within the black community who tried to out him.

For many gays in Atlanta, the holiday honoring King has become a formal event to carefully plan and carry out. For example, a community brunch, funded by Human Rights Campaign, a national gay political lobbying group, will be held at the Atlanta Gay and Lesbian Center on Ralph McGill Boulevard.

"We took the page from the history book and emulated it, said Jimmie Scott, who is black and gay.

"What I see in our participation of the celebration is that we are all connected," said the Atlanta resident and member of Georgia Equality, a gay political lobbying group. "We're part of the same family."

Yet the relationship between gays and civil rights activists is complicated by the role of Christian churches, which have been the backbone of the civil rights movement as well as the gay community's most vocal critic, historians and community leaders say.

Pejorative views still flood some congregations. Consider the controversial speech decrying homosexuals from the Rev. Reggie White, a former Green Bay Packers football player, at the Southern Baptist Convention meeting in Atlanta two years ago.

"The presence of gays in this march speaks of the level of understanding and coexistence that goes beyond a specific interpretation of Christianity," said Craig Washington, director of the center.

For veteran civil rights activists such as Joseph Lowery, their mission never excluded anyone, yet he says certain issues such as marriage for gay couples invite discussion.

"Every human being is sacred in the sight of God, but there may be room for debate for some technical and tertiary issues," said Lowery, former president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

King's widow, Coretta Scott King, has always been supportive of gay issues and has been a consistent champion of gay rights.

Forty years later, acceptance prompts gay Jews like Lesser to march.

"I want to be able to help my African-American gay and lesbian [friends] in my community to be welcomed in their own community, too," he said.

ROCKDALE

Randy Poynter, 47, led several agencies

By KAY POWELL
kpowell@ajc.com

Randy Poynter ran for lieutenant governor in 1998.

Randy Poynter was guided by his philosophy of more local control of government in a political career that culminated in an unsuccessful 1998 race for lieutenant governor.

He decided to run for lieutenant governor after serving as chairman of the Association County Commissioners of Georgia, the Atlanta Regional Commission and the Rockdale County Commission.

Those offices were defined by his vision for planned growth and his ability to build coalitions, said Rockdale County Commission Chairman Norman Wheeler of Conyers.

Mr. Poynter, 47, died at his Rockdale County residence Sunday. An autopsy is being performed, said Dr. Stephen Boyle, the county coroner. Funeral plans will be announced by Harry L. White Funeral Home.

Mr. Poynter, a native of Indianapolis who was reared in Rockdale County, was elected to the County Commission in 1989, the start of his political career.

"Randy was really highly energetic and a very good thinker. He could think a problem out and turn it over to other people to complete," said Mr. Wheeler. "He had the vision to see what was needed five or 10 years out."

Mr. Wheeler credits Mr. Poynter with the development of Rockdale County's first land use plan. Another of his priorities was the county reservoir, said retired Rockdale County Commissioner Bud Sosebee.

"I admired him for his visionary insight," said Mr. Sosebee. The reservoir comes on line in 30 to 60 days, just in time to put the county in a sound position when other water systems in the metro Atlanta area face problems, he added.

It was Mr. Poynter's idea to develop the land around the reservoir as a veterans' memorial park, which is under development, said Mr. Sosebee.

Mr. Poynter served three terms on the County Commission — 10 years as chairman — and was chairman of the regional planning organization twice between 1993 and 1997, when he resigned to run for lieutenant governor. Simultaneously, he was chairman of the state county commissioners' organization.

"Certainly, Randy was one of the most energetic and enthusiastic leaders the Atlanta Regional Commission ever had," said retired Executive Director Harry West of Atlanta.

"He saw the big picture and was able to see what needed to be done in the metropolitan region, even though he came from a small suburban county."

Governing Magazine named Mr. Poynter an outstanding public figure of the 1990s, added Mr. West.

Most recently, Mr. Poynter was president of a company he founded, PoyntSource Solutions Inc., a wastewater management consulting firm.

Among his survivors are his wife, Libby Poynter; two sons, Randolph Poynter and David Poynter, both students at the University of Georgia; his parents, Marion and Ken Poynter of Florida, and three sisters, said Rockdale Public Information Officer Julie Mills.

LAW & ORDER

Home invasion suspect kills self

A man suspected in a home invasion, in which a 64-year-old Rockdale County woman was beaten, shot and killed himself Saturday afternoon, a Rockdale Sheriff's Department spokeswoman said.

Acting on a tip, detectives went to the Conyers Motor Inn on Northlake Drive, said Deputy Jo[illegible] detec-

name was being withheld until relatives could be notified. The cause of the fire had not been determined Sunday.

GWINNETT COUNTY

Lawrenceville blaze's cause being probed

Gwinnett County authorities are trying to determine the cause of a fire Sunday at the Dolco Packaging Corp. on Hosea Road in Lawrenceville, which began around 1:45 p.m. The fire was brought under control quickly, but firefighters spent hours carrying [illegible]

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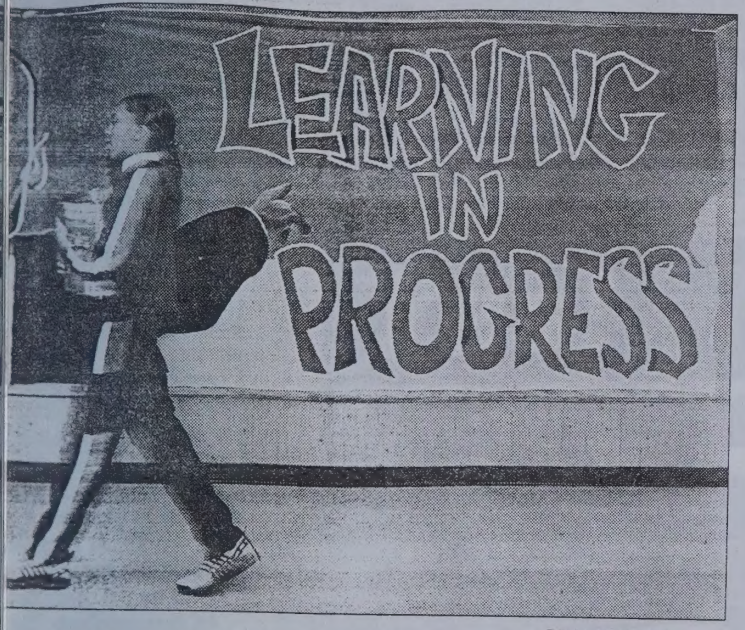
N LUTHER KING JR.'S BIRTHDAY



RICH ADDICKS / Staff

kson walks past a poster at Atlanta's King Middle School. The progress, thanks to the Urban Learning Center, a reform pro- school walls to tackle issues in the home and community.

movies are made of, but it was real."

Urban Learning Centers grew out of an early 1990s brainstorming session in Los Angeles that included about 100 teachers, school administrators, residents and business leaders. The topic: improving urban education. Solutions included addressing the emotional well-being of students and families and making the school a place of learning for the whole community.

These ideas were put to the test at two of L.A.'s worst schools, and six years later the results seem promising. Standardized test scores at the schools are still low, but they're steadily rising, according to data provided by Urban Learning officials. More students are going on to college. Crime and violence are way down. Vandalism — a regular occurrence in the past — has been virtually eliminated.

Urban Learning Centers is one of 10 education reform programs developed by New American Schools, a nonprofit organization based in Arlington, Va. Atlanta Public Schools pays $26,000 a year for the services.

Huff said [illegible]

said.

There won't be any huge increase in test scores, Huff added. Instead, she is hoping for steady, incremental gains.

A fresh start

Sometimes, change at King is measured one child at a time. Take the case of seventh-grade student Tia Young.

When she came to King last year, Tia and her family were homeless. Her mother has long battled mental illness and has trouble holding down jobs. The family was on the move every few months, forcing Tia to change schools so often she can't even remember the name of the school she attended before King.

The school helped Tia's family find refuge in a nearby shelter, and Tia was referred to one of the on-site psychologists for counseling. Tia's mother got training to help Tia manage her asthma. The school even helped Tia's mother get a job as a short-order cook at a nearby diner.

When the family moved over the summer to west Atlanta, out of King's attendance district, the school found a donor to pay Tia's

Gays hold holiday in high esteem

By CHARLES YOO
cyoo@ajc.com

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lady Laura Bush), and
wed by wreath-laying at
g's Tomb.

. p.m. Annual King
day parade. Mayor
ley Franklin and Gov.
Barnes are grand
shals.

p.m. Gala celebration
oisfeuillet Jones
nta Civic Center, 395
dmont Ave. Tyrese,
ah Mike and Hank
want to perform.

A somewhat shy girl with a big smile, Tia has lots of friends and is doing well at school this year, making mostly A's on her report card.

Tia is clearly grateful for all the help. "It makes me feel so happy, that I cannot stop smiling," she said during snack time at King's after-school program.

"There are limits" to what a school can do, said Huff. "We cannot do it all. But we can do some things. We can make a difference. We can make it better."

ity, according to the Contemporary Black Biography. But he was made to forfeit a lead role in helping King after threats from his critics within the black community who tried to out him.

For many gays in Atlanta, the holiday honoring King has become a formal event to carefully plan and carry out. For example, a community brunch, funded by Human Rights Campaign, a national gay political lobbying group, will be held at the Atlanta Gay and Lesbian Center on

Lowery, former president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

King's widow, Coretta Scott King, has always been supportive of gay issues and has been a consistent champion of gay rights.

Forty years later, acceptance prompts gay Jews like Lesser to march.

"I want to be able to help my African-American gay and lesbian [friends] in my community to be welcomed in their own community, too," he said.

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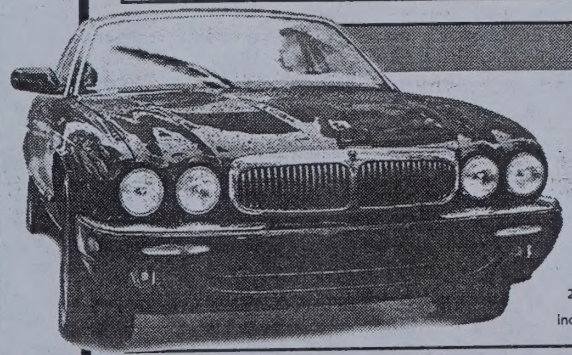

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